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CIA needs Mideast spies, not 'dirty-trick' artists

WHEN HE was running for president in 1980, Ronald Reagan promised to rebuild America's intelligence agencies after what he claimed were four years of morale-destroying neglect by the Carter administration. And shortly after Mr. Reagan took office, then-Secretary of State Al Haig promised that combating terrorism would be one of the new administration's top priorities.

Yet the Long Commission, in its report on the October 23 bombing of the Marine compound in Beirut, attributed that disaster in part to intelligence failures. The commission found that, although there was plenty of general information on threats to U.S. troops in Lebanon, the Marine commander "was not provided with timely intelligence, tailored to his specific operational needs"

The obvious question is, Why not?

The Long Commission's answer to that question is vague. Its report states that "humint" — intelligence gathered by human spies, as opposed to information provided by reconnaissance satellites or electronic eavesdropping — was ineffective and scarce. And that scarcity, the report says, was due to "policy decisions which have resulted in a U.S. Humint capability commensurate with the resources and time that have been spent to acquire it."

This means, presumably, that U.S. intelligence agencies aren't devoting enough money, personnel and time to establishing a network of spies who can infiltrate and monitor terrorist groups. Other critics have been saying much the same thing for years. They have noted, for example, that America's superb reconnaissance satellites can relay pictures of a limousine leaving the Kremlin but that only human agents — spies — can find out what the official in the limousine is up to.

The temptation to blame this deficiency on the Carter administration proved irresistible the other day to White House press spokesman Larry Speakes. "We don't quarrel with the fact that the CIA (Central Intelligence Agency) and other intelligence-gathering agencies have been crippled by de-

cisions of the previous administration," he said, "and we are in the process of rebuilding capabilities."

Trouble is, the Long Commission doesn't mention the Carter administration — at least not in the portions of its report released to the press. Moreover, President Reagan has been in office three years — enough time, one would think, for his CIA director, William Casey, to remedy the agency's allegedly excessive reliance on gadgets and to put more spies in the field.

This isn't to say that Jimmy Carter and his CIA director, Stansfield Turner, were entirely blameless. By most accounts, Admiral Turner went too far when he cut some 800 agents — including both spies and "dirty tricks" paramilitary operators — from the CIA's clandestine services. Morale suffered, and so, no doubt, did the effectiveness of the agency's "humint."

But in rebuilding the CIA, President Reagan and Mr. Casey seem to have focused more on unleashing it to perform dirty-tricks than on gathering intelligence. The CIA, for instance, is the conduit for money, arms and training for the anti-Sandinista guerrillas now harrassing Nicaragua. That's a big operation, involving about 10,000 Nicaraguan exiles based in Honduras. But the resources devoted to this controversial war could pay for a lot of spies, and a lot of spies are what seem to be needed in the Middle East these days.

That point was emphasized in a recent *New York Times* investigative report on Mideast terrorism. *The Times* reported that both Israel and the United States depended heavily on agents inside the Palestine Liberation Organization for information about terrorist groups in the area. Ironically, when the invading Israeli army forced most of the PLO's guerrillas out of Beirut in the summer of 1982, Israel and the U.S. lost much of their intelligence-gathering capability.

Rebuilding this capability should be the CIA's top priority. Most Americans surely recognize the need for spies in an increasingly dangerous world. Fewer, to judge from public opinion polls,

believe the United States should be in the business of toppling foreign governments. In this case, as in so many others, the public has a better grasp than the politicians. The United States isn't made any safer by playing dirty tricks on Nicaragua. What's needed is an intelligence establishment that can prevent crazies in the Middle East from playing dirty tricks on America.